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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the current crisis in higher education in the United States, in regard to decreasing resources, access, equity, societal role, accountability, and public trust. It also reports on a survey of five higher education administrators and five state government education officials that sought to determine what they believed would be the major political and economic issues facing higher education in the next century. The survey participants identified 20 political and economic problems that higher education will face in coming years. It found little difference between the opinions of the educators and officials surveyed and scholars writing about such issues. It also found that there was a consensus among scholars and survey participants that although technology is a panacea for many problems afflicting higher education, there is a lack of direction for applying such technology effectively. (Contains 15 references.) (MDM)

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INSIGHTS INTO THE FUTURE OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN THE UNITED STATES: A META-ANALYSIS OF ISSUES IN THE LITERATURE AND RESULTS OF A SURVEY OF ADMINISTRATORS AND POLITICAL OFFICERS

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Abstract

According to Forbes (1994) and others, higher education is in crisis. This paper reports on a study conducted to clarify the crisis in higher education and to identify future directions. Three sources of information were tapped: i) scholars writing about the field, ii) higher education administrators, and iii) state political officers involved in education decision making. A meta-analysis of trends and issues in the literature on higher education was completed concurrent with a survey of higher education administrators and politicians in the western United States. The investigation uncovered areas of economic, political, and psychological problems in higher education. Although definitive directions for addressing these problems have yet to be identified, some ideas and questions are emerging for administrators of the future and are included in this report.

The prognosis for American higher education in the future is guarded. Advocates believe the university can solve many of society's problems; detractors believe that universities themselves are a big social problem. In an effort to clarify higher education issues for the twenty-first century, published works were reviewed and, during the summer of 1994, ten spokespersons from governors and chancellors offices in the Western United States were surveyed. Spokespersons, representing higher education administrators and political officials, were asked two questions. 1) What is the major economic issue and the major political issue facing higher education in the United States in the future and 3) what can higher education administrators do to prepare for the coming century. Below are the salient issues illuminated in the literature and defined by ten experts as critical to the future of higher education in the United States.

Forbes (1994) wrote that our system of higher education is in "deep crisis" (p. ix). Indeed, the literature on higher education and the opinions of education professionals reflects pessimism about the future. Critical areas of concern include:

1. Decreased resources;
2. Access and equity;
3. The role of colleges and universities in society;
4. Accountability and public trust.

Decreased Resources

According to Harvey (1992), the 1990s dawned with higher education in its worst financial shape of the last 50 years. In 1991-92, state appropriations for higher education fell for the first time in a generation . Many schools slashed programs and limited enrollment. Tuition, particularly in public institutions, has increased steadily in the last two decades (out pacing inflation) but the public perceives no corresponding increase in quality. Austin (1994) believes the public

mourns for the "glory days of the 60s and 70s, when tuition was low, resources abundant, and students worried more about Viet Nam than getting a job." There is general belief that the halcyon times are gone forever owing largely to a depressingly consistent decline in resources.

Out of control spending in higher education includes i) faculty and administration costs, ii) benefits, iii) government regulations, iv) programs, facilities, and services, v) admissions and student assistance, vi) deferred maintenance, and vii) over expansion (Roche 1994). Colleges and universities, it is believed, respond to fiscal constraints by limiting enrollments rather than reallocating and using resources more effectively (ECS 1994) and, somewhere in the miasma of economics, students are lost. The Education Commission of the States (1994) maintains that "Students face large classes, disjointed curricula and ineffective teaching... ."

Access and Equity

Providing quality education opportunities for all citizens is the American way; social responsibility is expected of modern colleges and universities. Changing demographics and higher costs, however, are militating against access and equity. Minority enrollment is currently at 20 percent and rising; however, ECS (1994) claims that growing diversity in the student population is not reflected in the graduates or the faculty of higher education institutions. Students with disabilities, protected under the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, grew to 7.7 from 2.2 percent between 1978 and 1985 (Simpson and Frost 1992). According to Simpson and Frost, academically unprepared students may number as high as 25 percent of all freshmen. Women, many single parents, are bringing new issues to higher education which has historically been unresponsive to them (Spears et al 1994). Additional groups of students with heretofore unidentified needs are challenging colleges and universities. This new tide of learners requires expanded and different types of services related to

financial aid, counseling, social activities and physical education, health and child care, diagnostic and remedial help, and housing. To keep up with demographic changes, colleges and universities must examine curricula, admissions requirements, alternative delivery mechanisms, scheduling, and methods of teaching. In sum, meeting the needs of a changing student pool will dramatically change the way we do business (Levine 1989).

At a time of shrinking budgets, effectively addressing student diversity may prove overwhelming to colleges and universities. If they subsequently neglect special needs some potential students will be deterred. Those likely to be affected are the poor, minority, returning adults and the disabled. In 1971, the Carnegie Foundation maintained that growth and development of American higher education depended upon student diversity, institutional flexibility, and equality. By 1994, different priorities are reflected in the literature. Gone is the humanistic rhetoric pervasive in the 1960s and 1970s. In its place are dialogues about market driven curricula (Duggan 1994), technology transfer (Diamond 1994), and Total Quality Management in higher education (Mosca 1994). Educators now seem less interested in defending their traditional position than searching for one that has more to do with strategic planning than serving populations at risk.

The Role of Higher Education in Society

In every culture of the world, higher education has enjoyed elevated status. In Western cultures, this status has been sacrosanct for hundreds of years. However, colleges and universities are no longer immune from the grass roots criticism leveled at other institutions. The public has started to ask some difficult questions. Why aren't professors teaching more? Why aren't they more accessible to students, particularly undergraduates? Why build new facilities when the old ones are falling apart? Are college degrees marketable in the real world? Does university research truly serve

the common good? As Boyer (1993) noted:

> ...policy makers and politicians view higher education as a private benefit not a public good. They see the campus as a place where faculty get tenured and students get credentialed but they see little relationship between the overall work of the university and the nation's pressing social, civic, and economic problems. (p. 115)

Scholars take a broad philosophic perspective. For instance, Page (1985) asked: " Isn't it time to address the notion of higher education's place and role in a changing society?" (p. 221). He described higher education as an age old institution with "hundreds of years of tradition unimpeded by change" (p. 221). Simpson and Frost (1993) suggested that "faculty and administrators...rethink the purpose of the academy and the place of higher education in society" (p. 242). In reassessing its place in the social order, higher education must make difficult choices. For example, can higher education be all things to all people or must it question its very existence? Can it support a liberal education and train a labor force? Indeed, should it train a labor force? Andrew and Andrew (1994) asked, "Why should universities be the source of updating education and training when material is available in places of work on CD ROM or through satellite links" (p. 23).

Accountability and Public Trust

As higher education loses its mystique, more and more outside pressure is exerted to bring it in line with public expectations. In the 1970s and early 1980s, higher education administrators largely ignored external criticism. In 1975, for example, Duffy lamented outside threats to faculty autonomy. By 1992, educators appeared more conciliatory. Levine (1992) noted that academe was undergoing a test of public trust. Educators began calling for a redefinition of teaching and learning

and business leaders complained about the need to reeducate college graduates. Endemic tuition increases and perceived deficiencies brought criticism from constituents and elected officials. Politicians more often seemed adversarial toward than supportive of higher education, passing legislation viewed as intrusive but no longer ignored by educators. Duggan (1994) wrote: "Read the writing on the wall." Outside forces, he maintained, compel restructuring; "Do it and we will survive. Ignore it and we will perish."

A SURVEY OF EXPERTS

In 1994, five political officers and five higher education administrators from Western states (randomly chosen from among members of the Western Interstate Coalition in Higher Education) were surveyed to determine what they believed would be the major political and economic issues facing higher education in the next century and what advice for the future they would offer higher education administrators . Participants, ranging from university chancellors to governor's legislative aides, some with many years of public service and others with very little, provided their own idiosyncratic answers to the questions. Although the number of participants was small, their responses were prolific and occasionally passionate. Below is a synopsis the issues they identified as critical to higher education and the strategies they made for addressing the issues into the next century.

Political Issues

I. Balancing increased demands with declining resources.

II. Meeting diverse student needs.

III. Creating social problems because of restricted access to education.

IV. Raising the costs of tuition.

V. Declining public trust in higher education.

Economic Issues

I. Keeping education affordable and accessible.

II. Bringing public institutions of higher education in line with a market mentality through effective use of technology and better service to students.

III. Declining state and federal support.

IV. Finding funds to repair physical structures that have been neglected.

V. Escalating costs of providing higher education.

Preparing for the Next Century

I. Increase the use of technology for more effective delivery of classes.

II. Acquire better methods to manage and understand the role of technology in higher education.

III. Use strategic planning.

IV. Redefine the role of higher education in society.

V. Change the reward system to faculty so that quality instruction is at least as (or more) valued than research.

VI. Restructure higher education so that faculty and staff become change agents instead of obstacles to change.

VII. Make tough choices, such as limiting students.

VIII. Investigate interstate sharing of resources.

IX. Keep communication open and honest between higher education and major stake holders.

X. Gain credibility with all public sectors through consistent articulation of goals and needs.

CONCLUSIONS

The concerns of higher education administrators and political officers surveyed about the future of higher education do not diverge from the scholars who write about it. Although survey participants were asked for their opinions about *issues* for the future of American colleges and universities, they tended to write about *problems* and the problems they delineated were similar to the ones uncovered in the literature. The distinction between issues and problems reflects an underlying pessimism evident in both survey responses and written materials. A second observation from this study is that there is little or no difference between political and economic issues facing higher education. In fact, the problems discussed in the survey responses and the literature were often both political and economic, more cyclic than linear. It is apparently axiomatic that economic problems become political problems and vice versa. Securing resources and using them wisely have always been issues for higher education but it unlikely that these problems assumed such a high priority in the past. A third observation is that there was little difference of opinion regardng higher education issues among the administrators, politicans and writers included in this study. In addition, there was consensus among writers and survey participants that technology is a panacea for many problems afflicting higher education but there was also a lack of direction expressed for applying technology. In other words, individuals seem to believe that technology can solve many current and future education problems but they don't exactly know how. A final comment is that more questions than answers emerged from the investigation.

Questions About the Future of American Higher Education

- How does higher education balance increased demands from students at a time when resources are declining with depressing regularity?

- Can higher education continue to be viable when it is resistant to change in a changing world?
- Can colleges and universities reconcile the needs of a market economy with the needs for a liberal education?
- How does higher education address issues of access and equity? Can it bridge the gaps between economic strata of society or will it become a vehicle to create and sustain the gaps?
- Will alternative delivery methods, largely via technology, help to provide education for traditional and non-traditional learners? In fact, are there sufficient data to support the apparently widespread belief that technology can be a panacea for many higher education problems?
- Who is responsible for funding higher education?
- How can universities and colleges rebuild public trust?
- How effective are legislators in bringing higher education in line with public expectations and, conversely, how effective are administrators in communicating honestly and clearly with stake holders?

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